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ABSTRACT

The situations in which young adolescents identify anger and the strategies they use in response to anger were studied with students from a midwestern urban middle school health class. The sample included 53 sixth graders, 41 seventh graders, and 41 eighth graders. Responses to a one-page survey indicated that students reported more anger situations in the family than in any other setting. White students were somewhat more likely to report family conflict, especially with siblings, than were teens of other racial backgrounds. Anger with parents remained relatively stable over the three years, but anger with siblings decreased. Unhealthy responses to anger, such as hitting, swearing, revenge or even the silent treatment, are the more common responses from middle schoolers, but about 15 percent reported responding in a nonviolent way. Students reported the most violence with siblings and the least with adults. With friends they are most likely to try to work it out using a number of strategies. Some students reported the strategies they used to prevent angry reaction, such as taking a time out or reacting with humor. Two tables summarize some responses. (Contains four references.) (SLD)

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INDIANA UNIVERSITY
CENTER FOR ADOLESCENT STUDIES

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Urban Middle School Students Responses to Anger Situations

With the increasing concern about violence in schools, both researchers and practitioners are searching to identify precursors to fights and other types of violence. Anger is seen as one of those factors since the arousal of anger increases the probability of aggression and violence (Rule & Nesdale, 1976, Klingman, 1993). Although most people report frequent instances of anger arousal ranging from several times a day to several times a week (Averill, 1993), clearly most of these anger producing incidents do not result in violence. A clear understanding of the nature of situations that cause anger and adolescent's responses to those situations will facilitate educators, counselors and other youth workers in making appropriate responses to an angry teen, as well as the design of programs aimed at increasing anger management skills and preventing conflict.

Much of the research in anger has focused on adults, but recently several studies have focused on adolescents. For instance, Torestad (1990) looked at how 12 to 18 year old Swedish students described anger producing situations and developed a list of ten common situations from a factor analysis of student responses. Klingman and Zeidner (1993) used a survey instrument to collect data in a sample of Israeli junior high students. They identified the major determinants and sources of student anger with both teachers and peers, as well as the typical responses to anger. The authors found differences in the way students responded to anger depending on whether the situation included either a peer or a teacher. While both of these studies explore new dimensions of anger in adolescents, it is not clear that their findings can generalize to an American urban setting.

The study reported here focuses on three questions: What are the situations in which young adolescents identify anger? Why do these situations cause anger in young teens? What are the strategies that young adolescents use in response to anger? Are there any gender, grade or race differences in their identification, response or rationale?

Data for this study was collected from all students enrolled in a second semester required health class at a middles school in the heart of a midwestern urban center. Students randomly were placed in these classes. During a unit on

emotions, students were asked to complete a one page survey. The survey asked them to identify two situations in the past month "when you got really mad" and several demographic questions. Students completed the survey anonymously. The sample includes 53 sixth graders (29 male and 24 female), 41 seventh graders (17 male and 24 female) and 41 eight graders (25 males and 16 females) giving a total sample of 135.

Using content analysis strategies, five major categories in Table 1 were identified.

Table 1
Teen Identified Anger Situations by Gender, Race, Grade

CATEGORY	Male		Female		W		A/A		O		6th		7th		8th	
# of Responses	*153*	%	*113*	%	*145*	%	*102*	%	*19*	%	*100*	%	*79*	%	*81*	%
FRIENDS	41	27	53	47	49	34	40	39	5	26	39	39	20	25	35	43
PARENTS	22	14	25	22	24	17	19	19	4	21	15	15	19	24	14	17
SIBLINGS	35	23	25	22	37	26	19	19	4	21	23	23	24	30	13	17
SCHOOL/ TEACHERS	25	16	6	5	15	10	15	15	1	5	10	10	12	15	9	11
OTHER[1]	30	20	4	4	20	14	8	8	5	26	13	13	4	5	10	12

Teens report more anger situations in the family than they do in any other setting. Whites are somewhat more likely to report family conflict, especially with siblings, than are teens of other racial backgrounds. Anger with parents remains relatively stable over the three grades while anger at siblings decreases over the three years. The following examples are typical of anger situations in the family setting:

"My mom made me clean the bathroom upstairs. It was my sister's turn to clean the bathroom and she didn't have to because she was at my aunt's. I cried and called my mom names. I also did a very bad job of cleaning the bathroom."

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[1]Includes: Jobs, Sports, Social injustice, Damage to property

"My sister got some new clothes and I didn't. I got mad because my mom wouldn't buy me anything. I haven't done anything about it, but I am going to start earning my own money."

"My little brother won't do what I say and talks back. I hit him."

While unhealthy responses to anger such as hitting, cussing, revenge or even the silent treatment are the more common responses from middle schoolers, about 15% of the students surveyed reported responding in a non-violent way. As might be expected, students report the most violence with their siblings and least violence with adults. With friends they are most likely to try to work it out using a number of strategies. Table 2 lists the various healthy, nonviolent strategies teens report using when angry. Those students who identified such strategies are very creative in finding non-violent approaches to dealing with angry situations.

DISCUSSION

Middle schoolers have a great deal to teach us about their reasons for becoming angry and their responses to those feelings. As adults in their world, we often see only the action and do not understand the feelings or emotions behind that act. This study gives the reader a sense of what triggers anger in these young adolescents and some of the strategies they use to deal with their anger.

Although angry lashing out, either verbally or physically happens all too often, especially in the context family, many students have found non-violent ways to deal with their anger. These strategies include: Self talk, Keeping it light, Making a detour, Negotiating, Finding a third party or Doing something else.

Self talk. Students reported that they used their mind to give them positive messages about the situation or to simply take a mental time out before reacting. They report something as simple as counting backwards from ten is helpful in diffusing the situation.

Keeping it light. A few students found that responding to anger with a joke or seeing the humorous side of the situation helped defuse the situation.

Table 2

Healthy Reactions to Anger

STRATEGY	EXAMPLE
SELF TALK	**Talk it out in my head** **Close my eyes, count to ten & think of something else.** **I count to ten.** **I try to talk myself out of the situation**
Keep it light	**I squirted him with a hose and we got into a friendly water fight and forgot about our fight** **It was probably PMS!**
Make a detour	**Ignored him & walked away** **Left his house, the room** **I wrote her a note explaining why I was mad** **Tried not to take it personally** **Said - Let's squash it** **If I can't do anything about it, I leave.**
Negotiate	**Talked to them about the problem** **I asked him about the rumor** **I asked him if he still wanted to be friends** **Explained what happened to my friend** **Told them to stop** **Apologized** **Try to explain why I was mad** **I went to the source to find out if the rumor was true.** **I had a long talk with her. She said that maybe she over-reacted a little. We are friends again.**
Find a 3rd party	**Asked my friends for advice** **Talked to my mother/dad/uncle/aunt about it** **Told a teacher**
Do something else	**Went to my room & threw pillows at the wall** **Took a walk** **I wrote poems & songs about my feelings** **I was tired, so I went to bed** **Listened to my favorite CD** **I wrote in my diary** **I usually sit by myself. Think things out. When I am really angry I write stories or songs.** **I go to the Y and exercise.**

One student reported squirting the other with a hose which started a friendly water fight.

Make a detour. Many students report leaving the situation that was the impetus for anger. Some others said that they left the situation. One said that writing a note explaining things was helpful. Simply refusing to engage in escalating anger was a solution for many.

Negotiate. Most students were willing to try and work things out - especially with their friends. They often base this negotiation process on the bond of friendship, seeing that anger is something to be worked trough, but does not need to destroy a relationship.

Find a third party. To some this category might seem like "tattling,' but student say they are doing is either working out their feelings or getting advice from another person or are asking another person to help negotiate the situation. Both peers and adults were mentioned in their role, but adults were mentioned more frequently.

Do something else. Another popular strategy was to do something else to deal with the anger. Most chose quiet activities like listening to music, writing or taking a walk. Others reported more physical activities like playing basketball, going to the Y or throwing pillows.

Clearly these young adolescents have developed positive strategies for coping with everyday anger. All adults who work with youth need to be aware of the positive strategies, reinforce them when they see them in use and teach them as alternatives to the unhealthy strategies such as fighting, hitting, pouting, retaliation, and rumor generation.

This study also illustrates some gender differences in relationships that trigger anger. In addition attention must be paid to the amount of violence that occurs in anger situations between siblings.

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